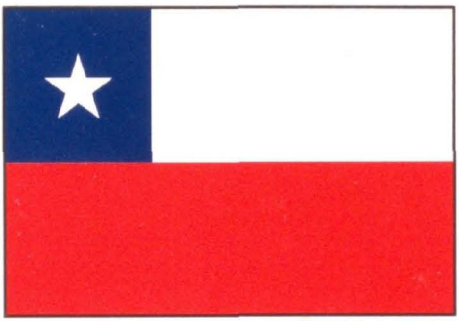
FOR REFERENCE ONLY INDIANA COLLECTION

Porter County

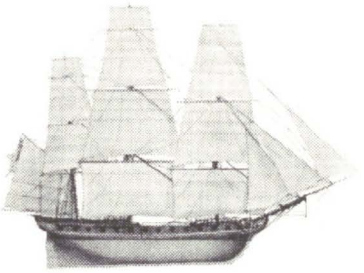
VALPARAISO & PORTER COUNTY

How we got our name.

Valparaiso, Chile, and Captain David Porter, USN
Valparaiso, Indiana, in Porter County, USA



by John D. Wolf



The Essex

In confidence that every citizen, young and old, present and future, will want to know the source of our unusual name,

INDIANA FEDERAL BANK FOR SAVINGS

in cooperation with the

GREATER VALPARAISO CHAMBER OF COMMERCE

have provided this brochure.

Captain David Porter

A Fight for Freedom of the Seas

The young nation felt it had been bullied and pushed around on the seas for 25 years by the then most powerful nation, Great Britain, known as "the ruler of the seas." Since 1803, 4,000 American seamen had been seized and impressed into service on British ships of war.

When Congress declared war on Great Britain on June 18, 1812, the war was really a continuation of America's struggle for independence.

America's war aims were to put an end to British interference with American seamen, trade, and shipping. It was a fight for freedom of the seas.

With fewer than 20 ships, the young Navy set out to attack Great Britain's 800 men-of-war. Yet, in less than a year, the infant American Navy had won six battles in a row. They did this with superior seamanship, gunnery, and leadership.

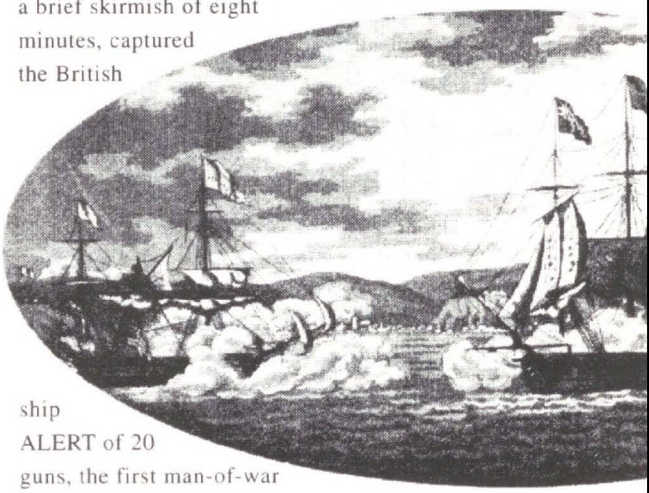
The quality of leadership was exemplified in the 32-year-old David Porter, whose remarkable exploits on the ESSEX were published for the nation to read in 1815.

By the time settlers reached Northwest Indiana after the Treaty of Tippecanoe in October, 1832, the name of Porter and the Battle of Valparaiso were already inscribed in the minds and hearts of the pioneers.

David Porter's father had commanded a privateer during the Revolution. Born in Boston, young David went to sea with his father at the age of 16 and saw action. In 1798, he entered the Navy as a midshipman and fought against the French. In the war against Tripoli, he was captured and imprisoned.

Seemingly destined to heroics, Porter rose in the ranks quickly. Self-assured, thoroughly schooled in seamanship and navigation, gifted with good judgement, courage, and patriotism, he was idolized by the men who served with him.

Porter trained the crew of the ESSEX well. On July 3rd, 1812, the day after Porter was promoted to Captain, the ship left port, captured six prizes, and after a brief skirmish of eight minutes, captured the British ship ALERT of 20 guns, the first man-of-war captured in the War of 1812.



On board the 32-gun U.S. Frigate ESSEX was a total crew of 319. Among them was an 11-year-old midshipman, David Farragut, an orphan adopted by Porter, and destined to be one of the naval heroes of the Civil War.

The ESSEX carried Chaplain David Adams, who also served as schoolmaster to the 12 midshipmen on board.

The ESSEX left Delaware Bay on October 28, 1812, heading for the South Atlantic to raid British commerce. Missing a rendezvous with a Navy squadron, Porter determined to sail around Cape Horn and carry the war to the Pacific Ocean. The ESSEX was the first U.S. naval

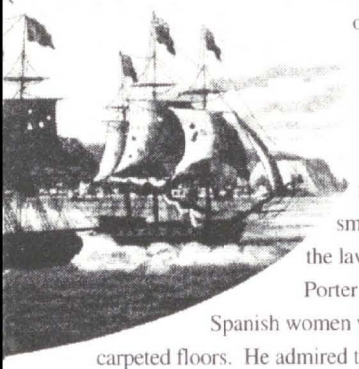
vessel to enter those waters. After a frightful passage through the Tierra Del Fuego and with provisions very low, the ship finally emerged on the southern coast of South America and the nation of Chile.

The first major port where the ESSEX found supplies and hospitality was Valparaiso, which in Spanish means "Vale of Paradise." It seemed paradise to the officers and men of the ESSEX after five months at sea.

While the ship was repaired from its hazardous 5,000 mile voyage and re-supplied, the officers and crew were entertained royally by the Chileans.

The arrival of an American warship created quite an excitement in Chile. Under the leadership of Bernardo O'Higgins, Chile had won its independence from Spain in 1810. A message was sent to the capital, Santiago, 100 miles away, and to the American Consul General Mr. Poinsett. Fireworks and a grand illumination were staged in anticipation of a friendly alliance between two young nations.

The "hospitality" offered by the Chileans made Valparaiso a favorite "sailor's port" for the officers and men of the ESSEX. In his journal, Porter describes the parties for the officers given by Governor don Francisco Lastre at the Governor's palace.



There were 20-course meals, each course being a meal in itself. Porter, being a small man, had difficulty with the lavish feasts.

Porter speaks of the 200 beautiful Spanish women who loved to dance on carpeted floors. He admired their high-combed hair but not their discolored teeth. He speaks of sharing "hojas" (cigars held by silver tweezers) and of choice Chilean wines.

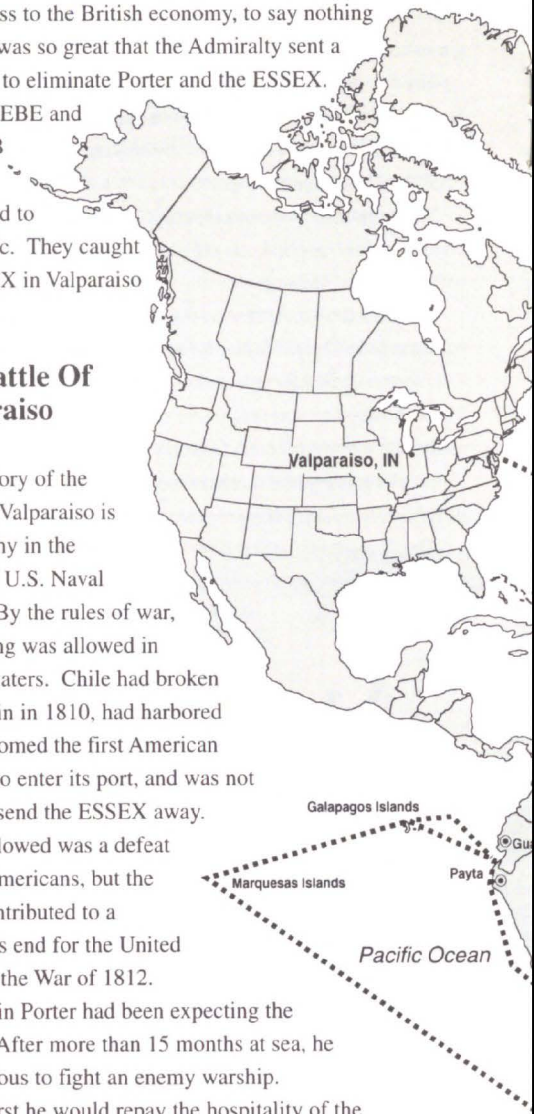
The sailors caroused in the local taverns. When they became reckless, the local police used their skill with the lariat and horsemanship to sober up the sailors in the calaboose.

In the nearly one year the ESSEX plied the South Pacific, its crew looked forward to the provisioning and entertainment in Valparaiso Harbor.

Porter took the ESSEX to search the ocean for British whaling ships. In 11 months, he captured 12 ships, 302 men, 107 guns, and ruined tonnage valued at $2.5 million.

This was a huge loss to Britain who depended on whale oil as we do on electricity.

The loss to the British economy, to say nothing of pride, was so great that the Admiralty sent a squadron to eliminate Porter and the ESSEX. The PHOEBE and CHERUB were dispatched to the Pacific. They caught the ESSEX in Valparaiso Harbor.



The Battle Of Valparaiso

The story of the Battle of Valparaiso is noteworthy in the annals of U.S. Naval history. By the rules of war, no fighting was allowed in neutral waters. Chile had broken with Spain in 1810, had harbored and welcomed the first American warship to enter its port, and was not about to send the ESSEX away. What followed was a defeat for the Americans, but the battle contributed to a victorious end for the United States in the War of 1812.

Captain Porter had been expecting the British. After more than 15 months at sea, he was anxious to fight an enemy warship.

But first he would repay the hospitality of the citizens of Valparaiso. A dinner and ball were held aboard the ESSEX, now decked out with scrubbed decks, pennants and lanterns for the festivities.

At dawn the next day, two British warships were sighted entering the harbor. They were the 36-gun PHOEBE, approximately equal to the ESSEX, and the 26-gun CHERUB. Since the harbor was neutral, the ships anchored within sight of each other and a stand-off ensued. Captain Hillyar of the PHOEBE and Captain Porter met

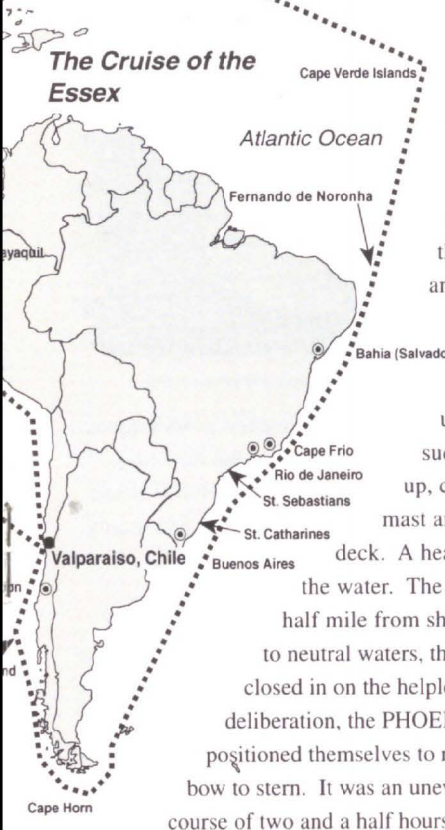
frequently ashore where Porter attempted to induce Hillyar to engage in a single-ship combat. When ashore, the sailors from both ships maintained an uneasy truce.

But the war of words went on as each ship taunted the other with slogan pennants. The ESSEX displayed "Free Trade and Sailor's Rights." The PHOEBE replied with "God, our Country: British sailor's best right; traitor's offend both."

Over the quiet harbor the crews shouted insults at each other. Songs were sung to familiar tunes like "Yankee Doodle" extolling naval victories.

For five weeks the stalemate continued. Porter continued by letter and by action in his attempts to provoke the British to single combat. It was a cat-and-mouse game of "I dare you."

But the game of words was about to end and the cannons were to speak. Several times Porter tried to escape the harbor for the open sea. Not until March 28 did Porter discover the "siesta" time of the British sailors.



The End of the ESSEX

A strong wind came up, the sail of the ESSEX shot up and the ship rushed to clear the harbor. As it rounded Point Gruesa under full sail, a sudden squall came up, caught the top main mast and crashed it to the deck. A heavy spar dragged in the water. The ship floundered a half mile from shore. Paying no heed to neutral waters, the British ships closed in on the helpless ESSEX. With deliberation, the PHOEBE and CHERUB positioned themselves to rake the frigate from bow to stern. It was an uneven battle. In the course of two and a half hours, 700 cannonballs

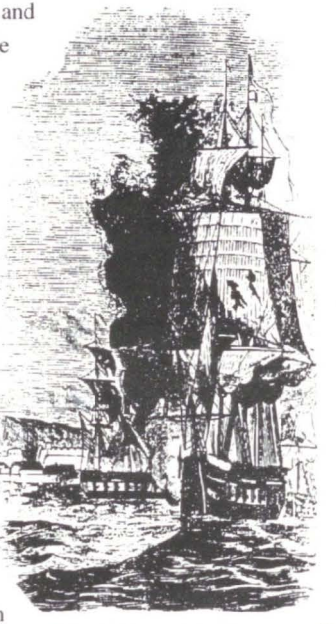
were fired at the ESSEX. The damage was mortal. Porter's return fire drove off the CHERUB but the PHOEBE'S longer range guns were decisive.

The crew of the ESSEX numbered 255 at this time. One hundred and fifty four were killed, wounded, or missing. All but one officer perished. Some gun crews had three changes of gunners stacked around them. The decks were strewn with the dead.

Midshipman Farragut, only 12 years old, was drenched with blood from a decapitated shipmate. The ship was afire and sinking when Porter lowered his colors. Only 75 men remained fit for action.

Thus ended the longest and bloodiest naval battle of the war. Casualties were 60 percent of the ship's company. The wounded were attended to in Valparaiso homes.

Porter and survivors of the ESSEX were paroled and allowed to return to the United States. They arrived, some 21 months after they had sailed away, to gala receptions in New York and Philadelphia and to a nation's gratitude.



The Battle in Valparaiso Harbor

Six weeks later, Captain Porter was given command of the COLUMBIA, still under construction in Washington. The ship was to be renamed the ESSEX. But the British landed and attacked Washington, burning the White House and the COLUMBIA. The War of 1812 was to end shortly thereafter.

Of historic interest is that Porter and his adopted 13-year-old son, David Farragut, reached their home on Delaware Bay, to meet for the first time 15-month-old David Dixon Porter. His pride would have swelled could he have known that the older boy would one day become the first admiral in the United States Navy and the younger boy the second.

Captain Porter published his journal in 1815 while serving on the Navy Board and living as a gentleman farmer near Washington where he raised a large family and entertained. Porter was called back to service in 1822 to destroy the West Indies Pirates. Based out of Key West, Florida, he accomplished this task only to be rewarded with a Court Martial for his over-zealous pursuit of a pirate on Spanish Puerto Rican Territory.

Porter was eventually exonerated, but in anger he accepted an Admiral's commission in the Mexican Navy. For some reason he was never paid and resigned.

President Andrew Jackson, a great admirer of the feisty Commodore, appointed Porter to be ambassador to Turkey where he served effectively for 12 years. He died in 1843 and is buried in Philadelphia.

Biographer Richard Wheeler says of Porter, "one of the most audacious, effective, and colorful men the Navy has ever produced. In his day, he occupied a position of renown on a level with such figures as Stephen Decatur and Oliver Hazzard Perry, but time has treated Porter unkindly." We hope this brief history can help change this.

On a hilltop overlooking Valparaiso Harbor, in the "CEMENTERIO DE DISIDENTES," is a monument which is inscribed with the following:

"In memory of the officers and seamen on board the U.S. Frigate ESSEX in this harbor in an engagement with H.M.S. Frigate PHOEBE and Brig CHERUB."

MARCH 28, 1814

Commanding Officer Captain David Porter

Ship Motto "Free Trade and Sailor's Rights"

Killed or Died From Wounds		58
Missing		31
Wounded		65
	Total	**154**
Total Crew		255

Also inscribed on the monument are the names of all killed and missing in the Battle of Valparaiso. The monument was erected in 1881.

****

A City and County are Named

According to local historian George E. Neeley, "The land which is now the site of Valparaiso, Indiana, and most of the present county was purchased by the federal government in October 1832."

Located on the glacial Valparaiso Moraine and the ancient Sauk Indian Trail from Rock Island to Detroit, the town had its first log cabin in 1834.

In 1836, the state general assembly separated the county from LaPorte County and named it Porter County after the famous naval captain of the War of 1812.

It is believed there are no other "Porter" Counties in the United States. There are several known " Valparaisos" in the world: in Columbia, Mexico, Brazil, Chile, Florida, Nebraska, and, of course, INDIANA. In World War II, a super-Destroyer, No. 356 was commissioned the U.S.S. PORTER.

The town of "Portersville" was divided and platted quickly and the town grew. H.M. Skinner, an early historian, tells of a group of old sailors who stopped at Hall's saloon and passed the evening by telling nautical tales. One tale was of a South American seaport where Porter had fought his famous battle aboard the ESSEX.

The story must have captured the imagination and admiration of local residents for in 1837 the town was renamed "Valparaiso" and a township was called "Essex."

That is how we got our name.

******

It is hoped that this brief brochure on how Porter County and Valparaiso got our names can make us aware of our rich heritage and our indebtedness to our national history. It is also hoped new sister-city relationships will be established between Valparaiso, Chile, and Valparaiso, Indiana by the city administrations, business communities, Universities, school children, the YMCAs, and other groups and individuals. The author visited Valparaiso, Chile, in April 1994.

Credits

Dr. John Feaster, Department English,Valparaiso University

George Neeley, Porter County Historian

Machelle Gold, Valparaiso Public Library

The R.W. Woodruff Library, Emory University, Atlanta, Georgia

Fort Sill Army Library, Fort Sill, Oklahoma

National Archives, US Naval Academy, Annapolis, MD

Line Drawings by Captain David Porter, 1815

Sketch of ESSEX from Kendal at Oberlin, OH

Booklet Committee
Peter Candela, Ann McBride, Cheryl Gebhardt,
Deborah Butterfield, Deborah Corsi

Booklet Design, Design Organization Inc., Valparaiso, IN

Printing, Home Mountain Publishing, Inc., Valparaiso, IN

Bibliography

Captain David Porter. *Journal of a Cruise Made to The Pacific Ocean:* 1815
Bradford and Inskeep, Publishers

Neeley, George. *Valparaiso Pictorial History:* 1989
G. Bradley Publishing Inc., St. Louis, MO

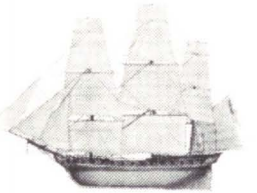
Donovan, Frank. *Odyssey of Essex:* 1969

Wheeler, Richard. *In Pirate Waters:* 1969
Thomas Y. Crowell Co., New York

Shepard, Betty. *Bound for Battle:* 1967
Harcourt, Brace and World

*****

John Wolf is a former Navy Chaplain, retired minister, amateur historian, author, and newspaper columnist who lives in Valparaiso.



BOOKLET SPONSORED BY

56 WASHINGTON STREET
VALPARAISO, IN 46383
219•462•4131

in cooperation with the

GREATER VALPARAISO CHAMBER OF COMMERCE

150 WEST LINCOLNWAY, SUITE 1005
VALPARAISO, IN 46383
219•462•1105

Published 1995